

Christ Ascended for Us – ‘The Ascension: What is it and why does it matter?’

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This paper continues the theme of our studies on the Ascension but perhaps we should ask what is the Ascension? What are we talking about when we speak in these terms? Perhaps the ascension has become one of numerous words that we have within the Christian vocabulary that we know is a good word to use but we are not absolutely sure why. Yet the ascension is probably one of the more straightforward words to grasp in terms of its basic significance. The ascension is the event by which Jesus decisively ended his time on earth in terms of his physical presence on earth by ascending; by going up to the place from where he had come. It occurred, according to Acts 1:9-11, 40 days after the resurrection and is a fittingly dramatic and unmistakable event in its reality and in its symbolism. Yet for all its drama (and who can doubt that it would have been a dramatic experience to witness?) the ascension is not generally treated as a core aspect of the day-to-day indispensable truths for Christian living. We might ask why this is so. I want to identify three possible reasons.

First of all, it might be neglected for an apparently good reason, that the resurrection, (that astonishing act of God's in-breaking power in the life of Jesus his servant) is the theological note that is sounded most pervasively and most consistently through the New Testament writings. Indeed, who can doubt that for Paul and for other writers throughout the New Testament the resurrection is a crucial aspect of Christian faith? In fact, Paul can speak about God as 'God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who raised him from the dead'. In other words, part of our understanding of God, is determined by the fact that he is the one who raised Jesus. Thus, it is true that the resurrection is of fundamental importance. Without the resurrection, the Christian faith as we know it, is impossible. However, although the resurrection and the ascension are not unrelated, they are not the same event and because they are both recorded in Scripture we should take each of them seriously. Thus, to value the resurrection is not say that we must diminish the importance of the ascension.

Perhaps another reason why the ascension is neglected is because of a faulty view of God's purposes for the physical creation. Could it be that many Christians hold a view of God's purposes that closely resembles the ancient heresy that the soul is good and the body is bad? According to this

kind of view full salvation occurs when one leaves the flesh behind in death and escapes into a spiritual existence in heaven when one dies. Certainly in the New Testament the flesh can be viewed as a negative thing, but even when Paul speaks of fallen flesh, the flesh that is tainted by sin, it is not the human physical body that was originally created good according to Genesis 1 and 2. Indeed, the view of heaven as a non-physical and 'spiritual' existence owes nothing to Paul's theology. Thus, for example, he can refer to creation (as J. B. Phillips puts it) as standing on tiptoe, longing for the sons of God to be revealed so that it might know its own liberation from its bondage to decay. Even when Paul speaks of his going to be with the Lord and refers to this body crumbling away and giving out, he recognizes that to be apart from the body is to be unclothed. He cannot wait for that moment when he is given that renewed body. Thus, if you are tempted to favour a 'spiritual' rather than an 'embodied' future existence your thinking bears a frightening similarity to that of the Corinthians for which Paul had to write the whole of this extensive chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians in order to set their views straight. In sum, he says, 'Christ has been raised indeed and he is the first fruits of those who will also rise'.

A third possible reason for neglect of the ascension may be that (although most Christians who treat the Bible with full seriousness as God's word would not have great difficulty in accepting that Jesus performed astonishing acts of power, which we call miracles) some have difficulty with the image of Jesus lifting off the earth and heading into the sky. This might be due partly to the sense of unfamiliarity that comes from confrontation with an event such as this in such a scientific age. But while such a reaction is hardly surprising surely it is not more difficult to accept the fact of the ascension than it is to accept other recorded instances of God breaking in to this world and doing things like changing water into wine or walking on the water.

Perhaps a variation of this discomfort is the image of heaven as 'up there' or, as the children's song goes, 'somewhere in outer space God has prepared a place'. This, of course, is the image that Uri Gagarin, the first cosmonaut, had in mind when he went up into space and he said, 'See there's no God up here'. I think that we do well to reject this view, but to reject it does not mean that we have to reject the event of the ascension.

The fundamental issue here is that the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament state quite clearly that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ. The question follows, where is Jesus now? In trying to help answer that question we ought to explore some background material. Thus, in the Old Testament, two remarkably similar events occur. Two people were 'taken' by God. First, in Genesis

5:24 we meet Enoch, not a major player in terms of the number of verses that he receives in Genesis, but a significant figure because he is taken up in the New Testament in Hebrews 11:5 and described as one of the heroes of the faith. I do not think you will need much reminding of the story of Enoch; 'Enoch the seventh from Adam walked with God and he was no more for God took him'. There is, of course, no mention of ascension here, nor any specific mention of the place to which Enoch went. However, the clear implication is that Enoch was 'taken' to the place where God dwells. The verb 'took' indicates God's sovereign activity. It wasn't Enoch's decision. He didn't say, 'Please can I go'. God took him. When Enoch was 'taken', wherever he was taken, it would appear to be a place where humanity can go. A human being, not a disembodied human being (and exactly how it works out we do not know) was 'taken'.

Elsewhere, in 2 Kings 2:1, we read, 'Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal'. Then, in verses 11,12 we are told; 'As they went on the way, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven and Elisha saw it and he called, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen" and he saw him no more.' Again, we are not given any indication that there was a dissolution of Elijah into spirit and a body which was discarded; rather Elijah, a figure that Elisha knew well, was 'taken'.

While these events seemed to prefigure Jesus' ascension it is important to note that there are also some important differences that should make us cautious to leap to unwarranted conclusions. Firstly, neither man is said to have died. Rather, God chose to take them to himself by an unusual means, bypassing physical death. This is very different from the experience of Jesus. The cross is the declaration that Jesus died, died publicly and unambiguously. Secondly, there is no specific reference in these two accounts to any transformation of the humanity of either Enoch or Elijah prior to their being taken, whereas that kind of transformation is indicated in the New Testament. Jesus was raised to resurrection life and that resurrection life had new capacities prior to the ascension. Thus, I think it important to recognize that (according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15) it is Jesus who is the first fruits of the resurrection, not Elijah or Enoch. It is Jesus who is the pioneer of resurrection life and, however we are to understand the mechanics of it, when Enoch and Elijah were 'taken', that transformation had yet to take place.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament there are a number of references to ascension. Genesis 28:12, Jacob's ladder vision, refers to angels ascending and descending. Deuteronomy 30:12, part of Moses' speech to the people, contains the image of ascending into heaven. Psalm 24:3 asks, 'Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?' and Psalm 68:18 says, 'You ascended on high'. In Psalm 139, where the psalmist is considering where in creation he could possibly go to escape from God's presence (should he ever desire to do so) he says, 'If I ascend to heaven you are there'. Elsewhere, in Isaiah 14:13, the thought is expressed in a negative context and of the proud desire to ascend. Thus, we find a number of allusions to the concept of ascension in the Old Testament.

Perhaps I might draw particular attention to several of the Psalms that prefigure, in some respect or other, the

ascension. Psalm 24 is a mighty and jubilant song that calls upon the gates and the doors of the holy city to welcome the King, the King of glory. In Psalm 47:5 we also read, 'God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets. Sing praises to God, sing praises, sing praises to our King. Sing praises for God is the King of all the earth . . .'. Such language continues until the very last verse where we read, 'The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God. He is greatly exalted'. Psalm 68:18 (picked up in the New Testament in Ephesians 4:8) records, 'When you ascended on high, you led captives in your train, you received gifts from men even from the rebellious that you O Lord God might dwell there'. Then Psalm 110:1, the most quoted Psalm in the whole of the New Testament, says, 'The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make the enemies your footstool for your feet'.

In addition it is important to refer to Daniel 7:13,14, a passage of exceptional importance for understanding Jesus' ministry both in terms of his use of the language, 'Son of Man' and also for some of the imagery that he draws upon to describe his ministry. It is part of Daniel's night vision and reads; 'In my vision at night I looked before me and there before me was one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven', that's not insignificant, 'He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence'. Notice what is unexpected there. This text, so often understood to be a reference to the return of Jesus, does not refer to a movement from heaven to earth, but of an approach with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days in order to receive dominion, glory and a kingdom. I think that that text is an important backdrop to our understanding of the theme of the ascension.

Now let us turn to the New Testament. What I want to do here is just draw attention to some of the variety of the available material. There are, in fact, only two places where the actual event of the Ascension is described: Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1: 1-11. (There is an additional reference in Mark 16:19 but this is a disputed portion of text that, I believe, was not an original part of Mark's gospel). However, the Ascension is alluded to in various other places. Thus, we might consider the earliest New Testament witnesses, the letters of Paul. Examples include Romans 10:5-7, Ephesians 4:8 and Philippians 2:9. The language of exaltation found, not least in the last passage, is also found, for example, in Acts 2:33 in a reference to the Ascension. There are also a number of references in John. John 3:13, in particular, is worth noting: 'No one has ever gone into heaven except the One Who came from heaven, the Son of Man.' Further, John 6:62 reads, 'What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before'. Then, of course, there are Jesus' words to Mary in the garden, 'Do not hold on to me for I have not yet ascended to the Father'. In addition, there are many references to the return of Jesus or the parousia. In 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5 Paul deals with this in detail with a church that is rather confused in its understanding of the issue. These references to Jesus returning imply that Jesus presently exercises a heavenly reign from which he returns to earth, and while, in most cases, there is no clear indication of how he came to be there we cannot have the return of Jesus without the ascension.

However, I want to consider more fully the primary source for understanding the ascension; the Gospel of Luke and Acts, parts one and two of a single major historical work on the origins of Christianity by the foremost church historian of the time, Luke the companion of Paul. Interestingly, these two books hinge about the ascension that is the only story recorded in both Luke's gospel and in Acts. In fact, Luke had a particular interest in this theme. We can see this in a number of passages. In Luke 9:28-36 we read the account of the transfiguration. This appears in each of the first three gospels but, in his account, Luke (alone) tells us that Jesus spoke to Moses and Elijah. In 9:31 we are told he spoke to them about his departure or (literally in the Greek) his exodus. This is, clearly, an allusion to the great act of God's liberating power by which he took his captive people out of Egypt, set them free, established them as a nation and set them on a path to a land. This suggests that Luke 9:31 is alluding to another liberating event in which God will break into a captive people's experience and set them free and, in the context, that part of exodus is the Cross. However, there would also seem to be a reference to Jesus' departure from his followers and, consequently, this suggests that we can't draw clear-cut distinctions between the cross, the resurrection and the ascension. They are all part of an interwoven package, distinct but interlinked. In the same chapter (9:51), part of what is known as the author's 'travel narrative', Luke (again alone) emphasizes that Jesus is on a journey; 'He sets his face resolutely to go to Jerusalem'. Indeed, Jesus is recorded repeatedly as progressing towards Jerusalem even, in fact, when geographically this does not appear to be the case. He is moving in a way that is not absolutely towards Jerusalem but he is still heading for Jerusalem because that is his goal. Why is it that Luke describes Jesus' movements in this way? In fact we are given the answer since we are told that it was 'as the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven' that he resolutely set out for Jerusalem. Thus, according to Luke, to reach his goal of being taken up, of being received by God into his presence again, Jesus must go to Jerusalem. By means of the city, he will receive Sonship at the consummation of a long journey. But to reach that goal he must accomplish God's appointed task for him – that of going to the cross. If we bear in mind other parts of scripture (noted above) there could even be an allusion to that experience as being taken up: but it is the Father and the return to him that dominates Jesus' vision at this point.

In Luke 22:66-71 Jesus is before the council of the elders at the time of his arrest. He is standing before the Chief priest and teachers of the law and they say, 'If you are the Christ tell us'. Jesus answers, 'If I tell you, you will not believe and if I asked you, you would not answer, but from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.' Here Jesus alludes both to Daniel 7:13 and to Psalm 110:1 but he notes that his listeners will see what is described there, not as the end-time event of Jesus' return, but as his reception into glory, welcomed by the Ancient of Days and given a dominion and a kingdom.

But what of the ascension narratives themselves? Such prompt a number of questions.

Firstly, How did Jesus go? There are several answers to this. He was 'taken' and, like Enoch and Elijah, God took him. He is passive in this particular situation; it is God's pur-

pose that he be brought home. It is God's desire to have his Son with him again and so God acts to bring home that which is most precious to him.

Secondly, Jesus was taken bodily. The various resurrection accounts by Luke emphasize Jesus' bodily presence among his followers. Thus, in 24:15, he took bread, held it in his hands and broke it. He had physical strength and grip and was able to manipulate objects. He also declared that he had flesh and bones. He offers his disciples physical contact; 'Touch me' he says, 'I'm not a ghost' and in 24:43 he ate fish. Why did he eat fish? Because that is what real people do.

So, also, we are told that he was taken bodily, but as he goes we are told that he was blessing his disciples (24:50). This is quite fascinating because although it sounds quite typical of the Bible it is not; there are very few references to such an action. In fact, the only one I can find, is Leviticus 9:22 where Aaron lifts up his hands and blesses the people of Israel. Again, this is a very physical thing but, secondly, it indicates the way in which Jesus left. He left looking after the needs of his friends. He gave himself for his friends and, now, as he leaves, he blesses them. He acts for their benefit and so blesses them with his own presence by the Spirit.

After this, we are told that 'a cloud hid him'. In the Bible, clouds are associated with God's presence. At Sinai, the mountain of God is enveloped with clouds. Psalm 68:4, Psalm 68:33 and Psalm 104:3 all refer to clouds in association with God's presence. The last reference is the confession of the people of Israel who believed that God is invisible and that no one can see him or come near him. However, Psalm 104:3 reads, 'He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind.' Now the clouds, his chariot, are clearly not literal, but constitute an image of God the warrior, God the victor, God the One who has overcome. With this in mind, when Jesus is hidden by a cloud, we are expected to grasp the allusion to God's presence and the victory, the authority, the majesty of God.

This leads to a second question – where is Jesus now? Simply, he is in heaven; a point made in both Luke 24 and Acts 1. If we pursue the question elsewhere in the New Testament, we are told little about the geography and the architecture of heaven. Moreover, Revelation is so full of imagery that we really cannot conceptually imagine it very clearly. What, then, can we say about heaven? Fundamentally, it is where God is and where Jesus is: Jesus the man. Heaven is the place of God's dwelling and it is the place where the human Jesus, not disembodied, but the true exalted bodily Jesus is present.

What difference, then, does his ascension make? We've seen that he's gone, we've asked where he is now and we've given this basic but important answer that he's where God is; but what difference does it make? Here are a couple of important points. First of all, the Father and the Son have sent the Spirit upon all Christians to enable us to be his witnesses. In Luke 24:48,49 Jesus says, 'You are witnesses of these things – I am going to send you what my Father has promised but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.' In Acts 1:8, we read, 'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.' Both of these emphasize God's

empowerment of Jesus' disciples for mission on account of his ascension. In Acts 5:31 we are told that God gives repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins on the ground of Jesus' intercession; recognizing that it is the ascended Jesus who is equipped to do so.

Let me come a final question – what happens next? The first thing is we do what we have been told. I love the question the angels ask of the disciples. They have just seen Jesus ascend into the sky and a cloud has hid them and the angels ask them, 'Why are you standing there looking into the sky?' I suppose I would have been standing there gawping into the sky if I had seen such a thing, but the point of the angels' question is obvious. You have your orders – get on with them. Don't stand cloud gazing. Don't stand there taking in the atmosphere. You know what you are called to do, now, go and do it. And what happens next? In Luke 24, after the ascension, after being parted from the One whom they loved most, we find the disciples in worship and back in Jerusalem, filled with great joy and continually in the Temple praising God. How different from the earlier scattering. Now we have excited and convinced and motivated believers.

But again we ask the question, What happens next? The same Jesus, the person, this man that they knew face to face for so long, that same Jesus will return from where he has gone and so the ascension cannot be the last word. We look for the Jesus who went to return; and this must be as much part of our lives as it was for these believers in the first century and for any who come after us. Wait for Jesus to come back. He is ascended, he is at the right hand of the Father, he is glorious. Worship him, witness to him and wait for him.

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